



## Testimony Regarding

### HB 5037, An Act Adjusting the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023

#### Department of Social Services Budget

#### Appropriations Committee

February 23, 2022

Good evening Senators Osten, Kushner & Cicarella, Representatives Walker, Abercrombie & Betts, and members of the Committee. My name is Cara Mackler and I am the Director of Campus Services and Legislative Liaison at The Center for Empowerment and Education. We provide confidential services at no cost to domestic violence and sexual assault victims in 13 towns in the Greater Danbury area including Bethel, Bridgewater, Brookfield, Danbury, Kent, New Fairfield, New Milford, Newtown, Redding, Ridgefield, Roxbury, Sherman, and Washington. We are a member organization of the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence and the Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence.

#### **One-time CSFRF Allocation to Address Victims' Safety Risks & Needs - \$2,900,000**

We thank Governor Lamont for his proposal to allocate \$2,900,000 in FY23 from the Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund (CSFRF) to the Department of Social Services (DSS) to address victims' safety risks and needs, which have been intensified by the pandemic, and urge your support. This funding will assist CT Coalition Against Domestic Violence's (CCADV) 18 member organizations, including The Center for Empowerment and Education, with providing critical assistance to victims including sheltering/hoteling, food, transportation costs, basic needs, childcare assistance, housing, moving, utilities, and furniture assistance.

Throughout the pandemic we have seen an increase in the complexity of issues facing survivors and financial support for direct client emergency needs, like those listed above, is a common request from survivors struggling to achieve financial independence from their abusers during the pandemic. Currently I am working with a college student who is in the process of applying for SNAP benefits because they fled their abusive home and are working to sustain their independence. They were recently diagnosed with a physical disorder that was a direct result of trauma they endured, witnessing domestic violence in their home as a child, and this diagnosis has prevented them from being able to find a job for months and afford school, on top of the barriers the pandemic has created for them as well. This allocation of one-time pandemic relief funding will allow our service system to provide much needed emergency assistance to survivors struggling to achieve financial independence from their abusers during the pandemic.

In addition to the emergency financial needs of survivors, this funding will assist with the ongoing emergency housing needs of survivors fleeing their abusive homes. For years Connecticut's domestic violence shelters have functioned well-above capacity with an average utilization rate of 122% between fiscal years 2016 and 2020, meaning shelters were overflowing year-round. But with the pandemic,

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shelter utilization has seen a sharp increase and the cost has skyrocketed due to the need to rely more heavily on the use of hoteling to properly social distance existing shelter space.

To date, we have received various pandemic relief funds through both DSS and the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, as well as having the opportunity to leverage private philanthropic dollars. However, we anticipate that hoteling will continue as a significant cost through FY23. Additional one-time CSFRF will be critical to addressing the ongoing emergency shelter and emergency financial needs of survivors.

### **Annual Funding to Support Domestic Violence Child & Family Advocates - \$1,440,000**

In addition to supporting the Governor's proposal for use of CSFRF to assist survivors, we're calling on the General Assembly to allocate annual funding in the amount of \$1,440,000 to fund 18 domestic violence child & family advocates across the state at CCADV's member organizations, including here at The Center for Empowerment and Education. Connecticut currently does not provide any state funding to support this critical role within the domestic violence service system.

As the pandemic has stretched on longer than any of us originally anticipated, the secondary effects of this global crisis continue to play out in communities and homes across Connecticut. Much attention has rightfully been paid to the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and social-emotional development of children. This concern is only heightened for those children who, on top of dealing with pandemic isolation, have been experiencing domestic violence in their homes.

Children receiving our services have disclosed higher rates of anxiety, depression, and body image issues, and are often isolated from their support system outside of their homes, particularly if their home is where they are experiencing abuse.

We often receive disclosures of child abuse, neglect, sexual assault, and witnessing domestic violence in the home when our education team visits the schools to provide our comprehensive education programs. The Center then works to support those children with counseling, resources, support groups and more.

The Child Counselor Advocate position at The Center for Empowerment and Education has been fundamental in ensuring the growth and success of the organization. Child counselors meet the demands and needs of our community by providing trauma-focused therapy sessions for children ages 5-17.

For example, our Child Counselor Advocate has been working with a 15-year-old sexual assault victim for nine months to date, providing trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT). This advocate played a critical role with this client, when she became suicidal and her parents did not understand the gravity of the situation. The advocate was made aware of the suicidal ideation going on at home, and immediately sought more clinical assistance for this client. She is now receiving clinical therapeutic sessions, along with counseling at The Center, among other resources The Center was able to provide.

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This therapeutic work has been essential in helping this client heal from her trauma and continue to face everyday life.

This is just one example, of many, where our Child Counselor Advocate was able to use her knowledge and experience to better help serve children who unfortunately became victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Without secure funding for this specific position, The Center would not be able to ensure all children who experience trauma and abuse in our communities are receiving the care and safety they so greatly need.

Currently, federal pass-through funds in the amount of \$11,500 support only about a quarter of the cost of a full-time advocate. We supplement the remaining costs through our education team, where we often receive disclosures from children who are then referred to counseling at The Center. All of our education efforts are completely self-funded through fundraising events. In the end, even with our efforts to cobble together the position of child & family advocate, we know that we aren't able to truly dedicate the time we need to fully meet the needs of all children experiencing domestic or sexual violence in the greater Danbury area.

As we begin to come out of the pandemic, we are concerned that there will be a large influx of children presenting with significant need to various systems, including the domestic violence service system. We must be prepared to meet the needs of these most vulnerable victims. Adequate state funding is needed to properly support a full-time advocate at each of the state's 18 domestic violence organizations, including The Center for Empowerment and Education. For a small amount of annual funding (less than 0.01% of the overall state budget), we can make a big impact on kids.

Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

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